

The Cairngorms through the lens of Adam Watson (5) – the road up Beinn a Bhuid, then and now

Description



Although I have been over and around Beinn a' Bhuid several times I had never walked up the line of the infamous road which, in the last century, became a cause celebre among wild land campaigners.



1967.10.15 Tom Weir & AW on Beinn a' Bhuid. Photo credit Adam Watson.

Adam Watson was at the forefront of recording and raising awareness of how wild land was being eroded by the creation of new roads in the Cairngorms and elsewhere. It is interesting that the captions to his slides describe them as roads, not "hill tracks".



1967.10.15 Beinn a' Bhuid

It was thanks to campaigners like Adam that when the National Trust for Scotland bought the Mar Lodge Estate in 1995 one of the first things it did was to remove the road up Beinn a'Bhuid. While I had seen photos of the restoration work ([see here](#) for example) I had long wanted to see it for myself and did so 10 days ago.



The former road (on left) and path that replaced it just above the old pines in Glen Quoic. July 2022.

Low down, vegetation now completely swathes the line of the former road, although it is still clearly visible. The footpath is just far enough away to remove the temptation to walk the old line (I went over to have a look and there was no sign of trampling).



Looking back down the broad ridge towards the Z-bend in the former road. July 2022.

The same is the case on the lower parts of the ridge, vegetation now covers the former track although the line remains visible. With the footpath having been constructed on a more direct line than the former road, the extent to which people notice it partly depends on the light conditions.



1967.10.15 Beinn a' Bhuid road [bottom of the Z-bend] Photo credit Adam Watson
Had the road been left in situ, however, there is no doubting from Adam's photos that you would notice what I have called the Z-bend.



Looking up the bottom leg of the Z before the former road bent sharp left, with the path now taking a more direct line onto the ridge

The challenge that was involved in trying to re-fill the bench that had been cut across the hillside and redistribute the disturbed boulders to repair the landscape scar was enormous. Had the vegetation matched that above and below, walking along you might not have known that this was once a road. But these are poor soils in a harsh environment and it will take another 25 years for the disturbed ground to recover fully.

There is a similar story higher up where Adam's photos show a swathe of destruction along the ridge:



1967.10.15 Tom Weir on Beinn a' Bhuidr road. Photoc credit Adam Watson

The landscape restoration here too has been of a very high quality with almost no evidence of the spoil that once bordered the road:



July 2022

The vegetation recovery, however, has been poorer than lower down. This will be partly because of the altitude, which means vegetation takes longer to colonise bare ground, but it is because the broad nature of the ridge and accomodating ground which makes it very difficult to stop walkers or mountain bikers wandering off the path onto the line of the former road beside it.



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As a result of this there were a couple of places where the path had morphed back into a road.



But generally the recovery of vegetation appears to have been pretty successful and it is continuing to colonise the bare ground despite more people walking and a lot more people mountain biking on the hill.



Former car park near the top of the ridge! July 2022.

Fifty-five years after Adam took these photos, Beinn a Bhuid remains one of the few cases of a hill road being removed from the Cairngorms or anywhere else in Scotland. Wildland Ltd in Glen Feshie is about the only private estate to follow NTS's example ([see here](#)).

In the 1990s, Kincardine and Deeside Council adopted a policy of mapping existing hill roads and opposing new ones (as a result, I understand it, of pressure from campaigners including Adam and his wife Jenny). With the abolition of district councils, that initiative was lost and the Cairngorms National Park Authority then took almost 15 years before it seriously started to try and control the proliferation of hill roads. CNPA Board Members should take a look at then and now on Beinn a Bhuid, be inspired and take the further step of removing the worst of the hill roads from the National Park.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA

2. hill tracks
3. NTS
4. restoration

Date Created

July 22, 2022

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